

SEXUALITY IN MIDDLE AND LATER LIFE

Sexual feelings and desires exist throughout the life cycle. In recent years, there has been an increase in research on sexuality in middle and later life. This SIECUS *Fact Sheet* presents some of the research that brings important insight into the sexual behavior, health, attitudes, values, and beliefs of individuals from their forties through their eighties and older. (See page 2 for information on researchers.)

Many of the researchers cited in this *Fact Sheet* did not define "sex" or "sexual activity" when they asked individuals about their sexual behaviors and beliefs. Each of the researches also phrased their questions differently and surveyed varied age groups. Therefore, direct comparison of these studies is not possible. Percentages cited do not always total 100 percent because some participants chose not to respond to specific questions. Although most of the research was weighted in order to generalize the results to the overall population in these age groups, some of the research (particularly among the oldest participants) is based on small samples.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

- The Harris Interactive study reported that 80 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 who are married, living with a partner, or currently involved in a sexual relationship considered sex to be either "very important" or "somewhat important." In contrast, 20 percent consider sex to be either "not very important" or "not important at all." (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 5)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 82 percent of male partners of menopausal women believe that sex is either "very important" or "somewhat important" to their relationship. In contrast, 18 percent believe it is "not very important" or "not important at all." (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 10)
- The AARP study reported that 74 percent of men 45-59 years of age, 61 percent 60-74 years of age, and 50 percent 75 years of age and older believe that "a satisfying sexual relationship" is important to their quality of life. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 24)
- The AARP study found that 66 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 48 percent 60-74 years of age, and 44 percent 75 years of age and older believe that "a satisfying sexual relationship" is important to their quality of life.

(*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 24)

- The AARP study reported that 50 percent of men and 53 percent of women 45 years of age and older agree that "sexual activity is a pleasurable, but not necessary, part of a good relationship." (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 10)

SEXUAL PARTNERS

- The AARP study reported that 84 percent of men 45-59 years of age, 79 percent 60-74 years of age, and 58 percent 75 years of age and older currently have a sexual partner. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 31)
- The AARP study reported that 78 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 53 percent 60-74 years of age, and 21 percent 75 years of age and older currently have a sexual partner. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 31)

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

- The ARHP study reported that 62 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 52 percent 60-69 years of age, and 36 percent 70 years of age and older considered themselves sexually active. (*ARHP Sexual Activity Survey*, Chart Q1)
- The ARHP study reported that 50 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 9 percent 60-69 years of age, and 18 percent 70 years of age and older considered themselves sexually active. (*ARHP Sexual Activity Survey*, Chart Q1)

FREQUENCY OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY

- The Harris Interactive study reported that 59 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 have sex at least once a week. In contrast, 35 percent reported having sex less than once a week. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 5)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 47 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 experienced a decrease in sexual activity since they entered menopause, 36 percent reported no change at all, and 10 percent reported an increase in sexual activity. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 6)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 48 percent of

RESEARCH

The information in this *Fact Sheet* is based on the research of the following organizations.

Harris Interactive/PRIME PLUS/Red Hot Mamas (HI/PP)

These separate surveys of physicians (301), menopausal women (580), and partners of menopausal women (1,352) were conducted by mail and online in January 2000, supported by an unrestricted grant from Solvay Pharmaceuticals. Survey recipients were drawn from the Harris Poll Online database of approximately 5.3 million registered participants. Complete interviews were weighted to figures obtained from the Current Population Survey as well as key questions administered in Harris Poll monthly phone surveys of national cross-sectional samples of 1,000 adults 18 years of age and older. Demographic variables such as gender, age, education, race, and ethnicity, as well as a variable representing the propensity of an individual respondent to be online were used to generalize survey results to the national population. (*Sexual Communications Survey, Harris Interactive/PRIME PLUS/Red Hot Mamas, Ridgefield, CT, 2000*)

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

The AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study of 1,384 Americans 45 years of age and older was conducted by National Family Opinion Research, Inc. (NFO) in 1999. It surveyed the NFO national consumer panel by mail. The final data were weighted to reflect U.S. Census estimates for age and gender in the over-45 population. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study, Washington, DC, 1999*)

Association of Reproductive Health Professionals (ARHP)

The ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey" of 1,000 Americans 18 years of age and older—reporting results for ages 50-59, 60-69, and 70 and older—was conducted by OmniTel, a weekly national phone omnibus service of Bruskin/Goldring Research in 1999. All completed interviews were weighted to ensure accurate and reliable representation of the total population 18 years and older. Weighting variables included age, gender, education, race, and geographic region. The weighted total of those 50 years of age and older was 355. The unweighted number of those 70 years of age or older was 90 (34 men and 56 women). Each interviewee was asked seven multiple-choice questions related to sexual behavior and attitudes. (*Sexual Activity Survey, Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, Washington, DC, 1999*)

National Council on Aging (NCOA)

The NCOA study of 1,292 Americans 60 years of age or older, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," was conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide in 1998. The study relied on National Panel Data, a market research firm, for the nationally representative, randomly selected sample receiving the mailed questionnaire. Analyses of data from the respondents were weighted for gender, age, marital status, race, and household income to reflect true proportions among the general U.S. population in the older age groups, and balanced to match the 1997 Current Population Survey findings. (*Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging, National Council on Aging, Washington, DC, 1998*)

National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs)

The University of Chicago's "National Health and Social Life Survey" (NHSLs) of 3,432 Americans 18 to 59 years of age was conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in 1992. The study is based on personal interviews. Results reported from the study are included in the book *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. (*National Health and Social Science Survey, Chicago, IL, 1992*)

male partners of menopausal women reported having sex at least once a week, the same number (48 percent), reported having sex less often than once a week. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 10)

- The Harris Interactive study reported that 66 percent of male partners of menopausal women have noticed a decrease in sexual activity since their partner entered menopause. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 10)
- The ARHP study reported that 52 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 26 percent 60-69 years of age, and 27 percent 70 years of age and older engaged in any form of sexual activity more than once a week. (*The Association of Reproductive Health Professionals "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q4*)
- The ARHP study reported that 41 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 10 percent 60-69 years of age, and 20 percent 70 years of age and older engaged in any form of sexual activity more than once a week. (*The Association of Reproductive Health Professionals "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q4*)
- The NCOA study reported that 71 percent of men in their sixties, 57 percent in their seventies, and 27 percent in their eighties or older engaged in sexual activity once a month or more during the past year. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 5*)
- The NCOA study reported that 51 percent of women in their sixties, 30 percent in their seventies, and 18 percent in their eighties or older engaged in sexual activity once a month or more during the past year. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 5*)
- The NCOA study reported that men 60 and older (56 percent) were more likely than women 60 and older (25 percent) to say that they would like to have sex more often than they do now. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 6*)
- The NHSLs study reported that 44 percent of men 40-44 years of age, 33 percent 45-49 years of age, 45 percent 50-54 years of age, and 42 percent 55-59 years of age have had sex a few times per month in the past year. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 88)
- The NHSLs study reported that 46 percent of women 40-44 years of age, 41 percent 45-49 years of age, 40 percent 50-54 years of age, and 30 percent 55-59 years of age have had sex a few times per month in the past year. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 88)

SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

- The AARP study reported that during the past six months, men with partners have engaged in the following

sexual activities about once a week or more often: kissing and hugging (85 percent), sexual touching or caressing (76 percent), sexual intercourse (52 percent), self stimulation (22 percent), and oral sex (17 percent). (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 43)

- The AARP study reported that during the past six months, women with partners have engaged in the following sexual activities about once a week or more often: kissing and hugging (86 percent), sexual touching or caressing (73 percent), sexual intercourse (55 percent), oral sex (18 percent), and self stimulation (3 percent). (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 43)
- The NHSLs study reported that 29 percent of men 40-44 years of age, 27 percent 45-49 years of age, 14 percent 50-54 years of age, and 10 percent 55-59 years of age masturbate at least once a week. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 82)
- The NHSLs study reported that 9 percent of women 40-44 years of age, 9 percent 45-49 years of age, 2 percent 50-54 years of age, and 2 percent 55-59 years of age masturbate at least once a week. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 82)
- The NHSLs study reported that on average, men 40-59 years of age find the following "very appealing": vaginal intercourse (86 percent), watching their partner undress (43 percent), receiving oral sex (35 percent), and giving oral sex (26 percent). (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 152)
- The NHSLs study reported that on average, women 40-59 years of age find the following "very appealing": vaginal intercourse (75 percent), watching their partner undress (19 percent), receiving oral sex (17 percent), and giving oral sex (11 percent). (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 152)
- The NHSLs study reported that 11 percent of men 40-49 years of age and 9 percent 50-59 years of age have engaged in any form of same-gendered sexual activity at some time in their life since puberty. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 305)
- The NHSLs study reported that 5 percent of women 40-49 years of age and 2 percent 50-59 years of age have engaged in any form of same-gendered sexual activity at some time in their life since puberty. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 305)

SEXUAL SATISFACTION

- The Harris Interactive study reported that 72 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 were either "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with their sex life. In contrast, 27 percent responded that they were "not

- very satisfied" or "not satisfied at all." (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 5)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 63 percent of male partners of menopausal women were either "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with their sex life. In contrast, 25 percent were "not very satisfied" and 11 percent were "not satisfied at all." (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 10)
 - The AARP study reported that 63 percent of men 45-59 years of age, 50 percent 60-74 years of age, and 35 percent 75 years of age and older were "extremely" or "somewhat" satisfied with their sex life. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 32)
 - The AARP study reported that 61 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 49 percent 60-74 years of age, and 37 percent 75 years of age and older were "extremely" or "somewhat" satisfied with their sex life. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 32)
 - The ARHP study reported that 70 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 62 percent 60-69 years of age, and 50 percent 70 years of age and older were either "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with their sex lives. In contrast, 14 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 18 percent 60-69 years of age, and 36 percent 70 years of age and older were "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied with their sex life. (*ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q2*)
 - The ARHP study reported that 60 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 49 percent 60-69 years of age, and 65 percent 70 years of age and older were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with their sex lives. In contrast, 16 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 9 percent 60-69 years of age, and no women 70 years of age and older were "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied with their sex life. (*ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q2*)
 - The NCOA study reported that 35 percent of men in their sixties, 34 percent in their seventies, and 38 percent in their eighties or older are satisfied with how often they have sex. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 6*)
 - The NCOA study reported that 53 percent of women in their sixties, 38 percent in their seventies, and 26 percent 80 years of age and older are satisfied with how often they have sex. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 6*)
 - The Harris Interactive study reported that 35 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 have experienced a decrease in sexual satisfaction since entering menopause, 46 percent have experienced no change at all, and 7 percent have experienced an increase in sexual satisfaction. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 6)
 - The ARHP study reported that 56 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 47 percent 60-69 years of age, and 44 percent 70 years of age and older were "more" or "equally" satisfied with their sex life compared to when they were younger. In contrast, 25 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 33 percent 60-69 years of age, and 38 percent 70 years of age and older were "less" satisfied with their sex life compared to when they were younger. (*ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q5*)
 - The ARHP study reported that 52 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 42 percent 60-69 years of age, and 49 percent 70 years of age and older were "more" or "equally" satisfied with their sex life compared to when they were younger. In contrast, 22 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 8 percent 60-69 years of age, and 10 percent 70 years of age and older were "less" satisfied with their sex life compared to when they were younger. (*ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q5*)
 - The NCOA study reported that 24 percent of men and 14 percent of women 60 years of age or older considered their sex life physically "more satisfying," 25 percent of men and 25 percent of women considered their sex life physically "unchanged," and 46 percent of men and 41 percent of women considered their sex life physically "less satisfying" compared to their sex life in their forties. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 8*)
 - The NCOA study reported that 31 percent of men and 17 percent of women 60 years of age or older considered their sex life emotionally "more satisfying," 29 percent of men and 26 percent of women considered their sex life emotionally "unchanged," and 36 percent of men and 37 percent of women considered their sex life emotionally "less satisfying" compared to their sex life in their forties. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 9*)
 - The AARP study reported that men 45 years of age and older believe the following factors would improve their sexual satisfaction: better health for themselves (30 percent), better health for their partners (22 percent), less stress (20 percent), more free time (18 percent), better financial situation (15 percent), better relationship with their partners (13 percent), and finding a partner (12 percent). In contrast, 22 percent of men 45 and older believed no change was needed. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 17)
 - The AARP study reported that women 45 years of age and older believe the following factors would improve their sexual satisfaction: less stress (20 percent), better health for their partners (19 percent), better health for themselves (16 percent), finding a partner (15 percent),

more free time (14 percent), and better relationship with their partners (11 percent). In contrast, 28 percent of women 45 and older believed no change was needed. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 17)

ORGASM

- The AARP study reported that during the last 6 months, 70 percent of men and 29 percent of women 45 years of age and older always had an orgasm during sexual activity, 22 percent of men and 33 percent of women usually had an orgasm, 40 percent of men and 19 percent of women sometimes had an orgasm, 2 percent of men and 8 percent of women rarely had an orgasm, and 3 percent of men and 10 percent of women never had an orgasm. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 14)
- The NHSLs study reported that 78 percent of men 40-44 years of age, 81 percent 45-49 years of age, 69 percent 50-54 years of age, and 75 percent 55-59 years of age always had an orgasm with their partner. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 116)
- The NHSLs study reported that 33 percent of women 40-44 years of age, 34 percent 45-49 years of age, 26 percent 50-54 years of age, and 25 percent 55-59 years of age always had an orgasm with their partner. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 116)

SEXUAL DESIRE

- The Harris Interactive study reported that 41 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 have experienced "lack of sexual desire." (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 1)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 45 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 have experienced a decrease in sexual desire since the onset of menopause, that 37 percent reported no change at all, and that 10 percent reported an increase in sexual desire. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 6)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 62 percent of male partners of menopausal women have noticed a decrease in their partner's sexual desire since entering menopause. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 10)
- The AARP study reported that 57 percent of men 45 years of age and older reported that they feel sexual desire at least two or three times a week compared to 22 percent of women 45 and older. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 12)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that on average, 46 percent of obstetricians/gynecologists and 45 percent of primary care physicians estimate that nearly 50 percent of

their menopausal patients suffer from a loss of sexual desire or a decrease in sexual satisfaction as a consequence of menopause. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 13)

SEXUAL ATTITUDES, VALUES, AND BELIEFS

- The AARP study reported that 30 percent of men and 25 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 45 percent of men and 47 percent of women 60-74 years of age, and 57 percent of men and 52 percent of women 75 years of age and older agree that "sex become less important to people as they age." (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 25)
- The AARP study reported that 32 percent of men and 24 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 32 percent of men and 26 percent of women 60-74 years of age, and 38 percent of men and 38 percent of women 75 years of age and older agree that "sexual activity is a duty to one's spouse/partner." (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 25)
- The AARP study reported that 1 percent of men and 9 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 5 percent of men and 28 percent of women 60-74 years of age, and 5 percent of men and 36 percent of women 75 years of age and older agree that "I would be quite happy never having sex again." (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 25)
- The AARP study reported that 28 percent of men and 36 percent of women 45-59 years of age, 38 percent of men and 53 percent of women 60-74 years of age, and 50 percent of men and 66 percent of women 75 years of age and older agree that "people should not have a sexual relationship if they are not married." (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 25)
- The NCOA study reported that 53 percent of men and women 60 years of age and older agree that new prescription medicines will have a positive impact on the way older men view sexuality in later life; 50 percent of men and women 60 years of age and older agree these medicines will have a positive impact on the way society in general views sexuality in later life; and 45 percent of men and women 60 years of age and older agree that they will have a positive impact on the way older women view sexuality in later life. (*The National Council on Aging Study*, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 12)
- The NCOA study reported that 81 percent of respondents correctly agreed with the statement that older people are just as susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases—such as AIDS—as younger people. (*The National Council on Aging Study*, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 4)

- The NHSLs study reported that 49 percent of men 40-44 years of age, 48 percent 45-49 years of age, 57 percent 50-54 years of age, and 49 percent 55-59 years of age felt guilty after masturbation. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 82)
- The NHSLs study reported that 46 percent of women 40-44 years of age, 35 percent 45-49 years of age, 53 percent 50-54 years of age, and 50 percent 55-59 years of age felt guilty after masturbation. (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 82)
- The ARHP study reported that 54 percent of men 50-59 years of age, 38 percent 60-69 years of age, and 34 percent 70 years of age and older considered themselves to be better lovers than in the past. (*ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q7*)
- The ARHP study reported that 38 percent of women 50-59 years of age, 28 percent 60-69 years of age, and 24 percent 70 years of age and older considered themselves to be better lovers than in the past. (*ARHP "Sexual Activity Survey," Chart Q7*)
- The NHSLs study reported that on average men 40-59 years of age reported the following: climax too early (28 percent), lacked interest in sex (19 percent), unable to keep an erection (16 percent), anxiety about performance (16 percent), inability to orgasm (10 percent), sex is not pleasurable (8 percent), and pain during sex (3 percent). (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 370)
- The NHSLs study reported that on average women 40-59 years of age reported the following: lacked interest in sex (34 percent), had trouble lubricating (21 percent), unable to orgasm (20 percent), sex not pleasurable (16 percent), pain during sex (10 percent), anxiety about performance (8 percent), and climax too early (8 percent). (*National Health and Social Life Survey*, p. 371)
- The AARP study reported that 26 percent of men 45 years of age and older describe themselves as being either "completely" or "moderately" impotent. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 15)
- The Harris Interactive study reported that 56 percent of postmenopausal women under the age of 55 say that they would be most likely to discuss sexual problems such as lack of desire or a decrease in sexual satisfaction with their physician, 16 percent would seek help from their sexual partner, 10 percent from their friend, and 2 percent from a family member. (*Harris Interactive Sexual Communications Survey*, p. 3)

SEXUAL HEALTH AND FUNCTIONING

- The NCOA study reported that 63 percent of men 60 years of age and older, who have had one or more sex partners in the past 12 months, have been able to consistently get and maintain an erection sufficient for sex in the past six months, compared to 37 percent who were not able to maintain an erection. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 10*)
- The NCOA study reported that 63 percent of women 60 years of age and older, who have had one or more sex partners in the past 12 months, have been able to consistently become and stay lubricated sufficient for sex in the last six months, compared to 33 percent that were not able to become and stay lubricated. (*The National Council on Aging Study, "Healthy Sexuality and Vital Aging," p. 11*)
- The AARP study reported that 28 percent of men 45 years of age and older and 14 percent of women 45 years of age and older have ever sought treatment from personal physicians, specialists, mental health professionals, or sex therapists for any problems related to sexual functioning. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 60)
- The AARP study reported that 11 percent of men 45 years of age and older and 7 percent of women 45 years of age and older are currently using, or have ever used, medications, hormones, or other treatments to improve sexual function and activity. (*AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study*, p. 61)

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